

FEATURE ARTICLE

Building a Deliberate and Repeatable Program for Developing Leaders of Character

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ABSTRACT

For decades, Military Service Academies have long purported to build leaders of character. Over the last six years, the U.S. Coast Guard Academy has built a repeatable system for leader development with curriculum, evaluation, and assessments. The Loy Institute for Leadership has played a key role in this effort ingraining the Guide to Officer and Leader Development and the LEAD Strategy with the Coast Guard's 13 Coast Guard Leading Self and Leading Others Competencies by writing curricula across experiential programs, integrating core academic courses, evaluating leadership competencies, and providing an annual cycle for program assessment and review.

Keywords: leadership, leading change, leader development, student outcomes, measurement, experiential education

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Introduction

The mission of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy is to develop leaders of character. The Academy has been successfully executing that mission since its inception in 1876. The leader development experience, however, differed for each cadet depending on various factors such as a cadet's personality and opportunities presented or seized.

In the early 2000s, then Superintendent RADM Robert C. Olsen recognized the need to implement a program that would develop leaders using a more deliberate and repeatable approach. He collaborated with Dr. James S. Tyler, a member of the Class of 1958, to establish a leadership institute at the Academy. In 2005, the Institute for Leadership (IFL) was founded. Admiral James M. Loy, the 21st Commandant of the Coast Guard, became the first Distinguished Chair in Leadership. In 2014, upon stepping down as the inaugural chair, the IFL was renamed in his honor as the Admiral James M. Loy Institute for Leadership (Loy IFL).

The initial work of the Institute, shepherded by Admiral Loy, focused on the *what* and the *how* of developing cadets as leaders of character, and was comprised of three components. The first component, the Guide to Officer and Leadership Development (GOLD) philosophy¹ (U.S. Coast Guard Academy, 2012), adopted in 2002, shifted the Academy's approach from one of compliance to one of individual development grounded in educational, adult development (Kegan, 1994) and self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). GOLD defines "A Leader of Character is one who embodies the Coast Guard's Core Values (honor, respect, and devotion to duty) and influences and inspires others to achieve a goal by seeking to discover the truth, deciding what is right and demonstrating the courage to act accordingly ... always." Captured within the GOLD philosophy is the second component, the framework

for leader development. This novel framework was developed by the Academy's Management Department and explains the *how*. The framework guides cadets on their leader development journey as they Learn from theory, Experience through practice, Analyze through reflection, and Deepen understanding through mentoring (LEAD; Goulet et al., 2012). A third and critical component was adoption of the U.S. Coast Guard's well-established leadership competencies (2006), Leading Self and Leading Others, into the cadet leader development program (LDP). As part of the LEAD strategy, cadets would practice these competencies throughout their journey. In so doing, the cadets would engage in leadership behaviors that directly prepare them for the organization they will be serving.

GOLD invited all academic faculty, military company officers, and athletic coaches to align more cohesively with a unity of effort of their shared responsibility to develop each cadet across the physical, intellectual, professional and values domains and over the four years with increasing leadership roles of responsibility from follower, role modeler, cadre (specialized professional military trainer), and organizational leader. Growth and development are the predicted results of intentional engagements with faculty, staff, and coaches. GOLD also emphasized to the Academy community the importance of leaning into these Frequent Quality Interactions as part of the developmental process. The LEAD strategy enables leadership experiences to be rooted in a common language of a set of theories and models as well as the sense-making process of reflection and mentoring—thus, making more transparent and deliberate *how* cadets are developing as leaders of character and accelerating the potential value of the lessons of these experiences.

Once the *what* and the *how* were established, it was time to connect this work in such a way that cadets would know that a deliberate and repeatable effort was underway throughout their 200-week journey

¹ See: <https://sites.google.com/view/cgaldp-jcld/gold>

to develop them into a leader of character. In 2015, then Academy Superintendent RADM James Rendon charged the Loy IFL with a complete audit of the legacy experiential programs (many of which had existed for decades such as Swab Summer, 3/c Eagle, 2/c Cadre) for how they encouraged cadet growth in the Coast Guard's 13 Leading Self and Leading Others Competencies. The result would ensure an accurate and repeatable measure of a cadet's demonstrated proficiency in each competency as a graduation requirement as captured by the cadet's evaluation report with dimensions grounded in the competencies.

Several Pieces of the Program Were Well Established:

- Every cadet participated in a select set of intentional experiential LDPs and courses over the 4-year program.
- Cadets received performance evaluation reports in each of these programs.
- The LEAD strategy was loosely woven throughout the programs.

The Work Ahead Included:

- A more deliberate connection of the 13 Leading Self and Leading Others Competencies to the legacy experiential LDP.
- A curriculum for experiential LDPs and courses that was repeatable and intentionally included the LEAD framework.
- A performance system to evaluate and track a cadet's proficiency in the Coast Guard's 13 Leading Self and Leading Others competencies.
- Establishment of processes for sustainability, continuous improvement and assessment.***

STEP 1—Put Pieces Together by Assigning Leadership Competencies to Programs

As previously mentioned, the Academy's core mission is the development of leaders of character. If one parses

out those words—leadership being the influencing and inspiring of others to accomplish a goal, and character being all about oneself embodying moral virtues such as the Coast Guard's core values of honor, respect, and devotion to duty, then our LDP's two-phased process focusing on Leading Self-competencies in the first two years and Leading Others in the second two years, is the cornerstone of the Academy's mission. The 13 Leading Self and Leading Others Competencies are part of the 28 competencies the Coast Guard identifies as keys to career success for all members of the organization. During the early part of designing the comprehensive systemic approach, our individual program managers would argue that they were doing all the competencies in any particular program. While these programs offered opportunities to engage and develop in any of the 13 competencies, we needed to organize the four-year program in such a way that the cadets could do a deep dive on no more than three leadership competencies during each of the nine experiential programs in order to have a deliberate focus that the cadets and facilitators could keep top of mind throughout. It made sense to have the Leading Self Competencies the focus during freshman & sophomore year and the Leading Others Competencies during junior and senior year.² The Leading Self can be seen as the behavioral manifestation of one's character. Recall our operational definition of a Leader of Character as "one who ... seeks to discover the truth, decide what is right, and has the courage to act accordingly ... always." These three actions define one's character and are reflected in the Coast Guard's Leading Self Competencies of Aligning Values, Followership, Accountability & Responsibility, Self Awareness & Learning, and Personal Conduct. It is important to note that one never stops guarding their character—one never stops "Leading Self." These high stress experiential programs including academics place cadets in numerous situations where they could be tempted to betray

² For a listing of the 13 competencies and how they map onto the different programs, see <https://sites.google.com/view/cgaldp-jld/cgaldp>

their integrity. Living under the Honor Concept places emphasis, training, and accountability into developing one's character.

Consistent with the GOLD philosophy of individual development versus compliance, it is expected that cadets will make mistakes within the Coast Guard Academy's (CGA) training environment, as it is viewed as a natural part of character development. When a cadet fails outside of policy, that is, does *not* act in accordance with established policy, rules, and regulations, CGA has two structured cadet remediation programs: honor & respect to correct identified character deficiencies. CGA's cadet remediation programs focus on the holistic character development of each cadet assigned and allow for all CGA faculty and staff, and mentors, to be directly involved. The programs are developmental in nature and focus on professional and character development and exist to promote reflection and critical thinking. Remediation is not a sanction or a punishment; it is instead an opportunity for a cadet to receive additional guidance and mentorship to correct their professional and character deficiencies.

STEP 2—Design Curriculum for Each Program Using the LEAD Framework

The LEAD framework is rooted in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) and Kegan's Adult Development Theory (1994). Students are given numerous leadership experiences, but what makes these experiences different from other college students is that students at the CGA are expected to apply leadership theory, practice, and make mistakes while leading. Then they are asked to reflect on their successes and failures and seek out mentors for sense making.

The requirement for all cadets to participate in the nine experiential programs has been a part of the LDP for decades. During the school year, this happens in the Chase Hall Practicum. Senior cadets are assigned to leadership positions with responsibilities for lead-

ing the Corps of Cadets using a chain of command and executing collateral duties. The first-year students, sophomores, and juniors are also assigned roles. This co-curricular military practicum with its focus on standardization, order, and discipline is deliberately austere and includes a regimented daily routine with required uniforms, inspections, formations, physical fitness, the enforcement of conduct standards, and an honor concept. The practicum is simultaneously a supportive and developmental environment where cadet leaders are facilitated by faculty, staff & coaches to foster norms that seek alignment with and reinforce internalization of the Coast Guard's core values. Feedback is provided during the execution of an evaluation system each semester that captures both performance and development on the targeted leadership competencies. During the summer, the experiential programs occur over multiple weeks at operational Coast Guard units, such as 5 weeks sailing aboard the tall ship EAGLE, participating in the 2-week Coastal Sail Training Program onboard 44' sloops, and 7 weeks while being indoctrinated as a swab (freshman).

Part of enhancing the LDP was weaving the LEAD framework through each of the nine experiential programs to create a fully developed and repeatable leadership curriculum across four years. Each of the nine experiential programs has a Leader Development Handbook.³ The Handbook suggests the leadership theory the student could be applying when practicing the targeted leadership competencies for the program. It also lists the types of behaviors a leader would display in the program when applying the theory and demonstrating proficiency in the targeted leadership competencies. Lastly, it provides reflection prompts for cadets and mentors to deepen their understanding of leader development. The students now have a four-year, repeatable, fully developed leadership curriculum laid out in

³ For an example of what this looks like, see <https://sites.google.com/view/cgaldp-jcld/handbook>

nine Leader Development Handbooks that support the LEAD framework (Cadet Training Branch, 2020).

In keeping with the LEAD strategy, all students take a three-credit academic leadership course which provides opportunities to learn more about themselves and leadership theory. Organizational Behavior and Leadership, taken during a cadet's sophomore year, examines the relationship of behavior (individual and group) and organizational effectiveness. The course uses personality and leadership inventories, case studies, classroom exercises, lectures, and discussion to increase self-awareness and their understanding of, unconscious bias, motivation, team effectiveness, communication, and performance management. Cadets are introduced to the evolution of leadership theory and how these theories support the current leadership models used at the Coast Guard's Leadership Development Center (LDC). Much of the work in this course is focused on helping sophomore cadets develop their own Leadership Framework which they will test and revise for the remainder of their time at CGA, and eventually present to leaders in the Coast Guard as a LDP capstone experience during their senior cadet year.

During the early summer between sophomore and junior year, a weeklong leadership training course known as the Mid-Grade Cadet Transition Course (MCTC) is taken by students in preparation for their new leadership role as cadre defined as a specialized professional military trainer. In this role, the cadets are called on to train incoming first-year students, cadets participating in preparatory programs or high school students aspiring to be cadets. The course is facilitated in small groups by active-duty Coast Guard Officers and senior enlisted leaders who will mentor them during their cadre programs. Using lecture, activities, case studies, panel discussions, and one-on-one coaching sessions, cadets focus on developing a growth mindset, the practice of emotional intelligence and how to demonstrate proficiency in the cadre program's targeted leader-

ship competencies of Accountability and Responsibility (for others), Taking Care of People, Influencing Others, Teambuilding, and Cultural Fluency. As with the nine experiential programs, these courses have a fully developed and repeatable curriculum which supports the LEAD framework.

STEP 3—Develop an Evaluation System Using the Leading Self & Leading Others Competencies

A major change to the LDP was to update the Cadet Evaluation Report (CER) which is used to assess cadet performance in the nine experiential programs. These report forms are now standardized across all programs. The first-year students, sophomores, and juniors are evaluated using similar forms to those used for enlisted personnel in the Coast Guard. The seniors are evaluated on similar forms used for Ensigns, which is the rank they will be when commissioned. A major modification to these Coast Guard forms was the addition of one or more of the 13 Leadership Competencies as elements of performance descriptions within the reports.⁴

A requirement of this new system is for supervisors to provide written feedback on the observed targeted leadership competencies for the experiential program in which the report is being used. Additionally, the students' proficiency in the targeted competencies is measured in the report using a scale from one to seven. If a student receives less than a four in a targeted competency, then they will be recommended for a remedial by their supervisor in the upcoming semester.

As an institution of higher education, we wanted to show the cadets how their performance was being measured in this co-curricular LDP. A critical undertaking in this effort was the creation of a Leader of Character

⁴ To see an excerpt from the Cadet Evaluation Report, see <https://sites.google.com/view/cgaldp-jcld/cer>

Information System (LCIS)⁵ to track a cadet's performance in the 13 Leadership Competencies over the four years. This new system produces a leadership transcript that shows cadets, and their support network, their proficiency in the targeted leadership competencies upon the completion of each experiential program. Program Managers of each experiential program also have access to longitudinal data to ensure decisions regarding changes to the program are data informed. The LCIS recently reached Initial Operating Capability and the Class of 2021 was the first class to graduate having demonstrated proficiency in the Coast Guard's 13 leadership competencies as a graduation requirement by achieving an average evaluation of a 4 or greater on the corresponding performance dimensions from their CER's.

STEP 4—Long Term Sustainability and Continuous Improvement

To ensure sustainability of the enhanced LDP, a Leadership Assessment Team (LAT) has been established. This body is responsible for coordinating leadership assessments across the LDP system. The LAT is chaired by the Director of the Loy IFL and includes membership of Institutional Research, Cadet Training Branch, and faculty from the School of Leadership & Management. The duties of the LAT are to:

- a. Develop, implement, and continuously improve the system by which cadets are assessed in their leadership proficiency.
- b. Develop, implement, and continuously improve the system by which feedback is collected from cadets on how the nine experiential programs did in developing their leadership.
- c. Make recommendations to experiential program managers for programmatic improvements.
- d. Make recommendations for resource allocation regarding leader development.

⁵ For an example of how this is tracked, see <https://sites.google.com/view/cgaldp-jcld/lcis>

Additionally, Cadet Training in collaboration with the Loy IFL holds an annual LDP Summit during the fall semester. The Summit gathers the CGA community and stakeholders to learn, review, and celebrate the work of everyone involved with developing leaders of character. The following are the key components of the Summit:

- Experiential program managers provide a briefing of their program to the greater CGA community. The content of the brief covers: (1) how cadets are performing in the targeted leadership competencies, (2) improvements being made to curriculum, (3) changes being made to program execution, (4) changes made to practitioner training, and (5) changes made to assessment(s).
- Program Cross Pollination. A working session and facilitated discussion with Program Managers targeting lessons learned from After Action Reports (AARs), and how enhancements made in one program can be leveraged across other programs.

Conclusion

The CGA has been developing leaders of character for decades. In the past five years the Loy IFL collaborated with other CGA stakeholders to pursue enhancements to this legacy program so that demonstrating leadership proficiency of both the character attestation of Leading Self as well as the apprentice level of Leading Others is now a graduation requirement for all cadets. A system is in place to evaluate a cadet's proficiency in 13 of the Coast Guard's Leadership Competencies and a fully developed and repeatable curriculum using the LEAD framework has been developed for all nine experiential LDPs and courses. By using the same evaluation reports and leadership competencies against which students will be evaluated in their commissioned careers, the LDP prepares graduates to be successful by extrapolating their LEAD-based experience at the Academy directly into their commissioned careers.

The research regarding how best to develop leaders continues to evolve as we intend to put focus into empirically assessing impact, outcomes and improvements in addition to increased fidelity into remediation efforts to include better “warning signals” earlier in a cadet’s 200 weeks. At the CGA, we now have a repeatable curriculum, standardized evaluation program, and a longitudinal data collection system that are all part of a continuous improvement cycle to ensure our program will evolve and meet the leader development needs of our cadets and officers in years to come.

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